

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Sixteen

George Pratt and the Church Folk

A SMALL BOY came through the back door of a West Side Chicago house, rattling marbles in his pocket. It was summer 1901. His mother was over by the stove, her Swedish blond hair screwed into a bun on the back of her head. Two thin hairs straggled over her forehead. Except for them, her hair was tight and flat against her head. Her mouth was a straight line at right angles to the center part in her hair.

"Five minutes past four. And you're just coming from school, George Pratt?"

The boy stopped rattling the marbles and tried to slide around the icebox toward the back stairs. "Aw, Mom, I was just playing marbles."

His mother yanked at his arm. "Marbles with them heathen in your school?"

"But, Mom," he whined. "I've got to play with somebody now that Willie's dead."

He hadn't thought about his brother for almost a week.

But saying his name out loud raised goose pimples on his left arm, the arm his mother still held.

"Mom," George said, not trying to wrench loose, looking up at her. "Where is Willie? Why did GOD let him die? Did GOD love him?" The marbles were forgotten in his pocket.

The back door opened again. A reedy man in a dark suit and a dark tie stepped into the room with a scowl.

"Did I hear you dare to ask a question about your dead brother?" he asked.

The boy felt his mother's grip slacken. He backed over to the icebox, felt its coolness against his neck. "I want to know where Willie went, Dad. I want to know why GOD let him-"

His father reached him in three strides of his long legs.

George saw him raise his hand. The sting across the boy's mouth tasted like a bit of GOD's wrath. George tried to spit it out.

"Children as young as you are to be seen and not heard," his father said. "And are you chewing gum, young man?"

"Yes, sir," he said, then promptly swallowed the gum. "Our son - chewing gum," His father turned the palms of his hands upward toward Heaven.

The boy moved his head so he looked first at his mother, then at his father. He kept swallowing, as if the gum could not be downed.

"Not my son!" said his mother.

"But Mom. Dad, the other kids chew gum. Everybody does."

"No son of mine will disobey GOD by chewing gum as long as I have a good right arm to beat some sense into him." his father said.

"Chewing gum is a sin." his mother added.

Hard slaps bit into George's cheek. He rolled his head from side to side trying to dodge. But his father's hand cut squarely across his face. "You will obey GOD if I have to beat it into you with my fist. Spit out that wicked chewing gum,"

"I swallowed it."

"This is a curse upon a household of GOD," his father roared. "Mother, bring me the razor strap!"

Upstairs that night the boy rested his chin on his bed room window sill and let the air, with its rainy dampness, cool the stinging in his cheeks. "Yelling and fussing and beating. GOD - huh" he said to himself.

Years passed. The boy's mother still flattened her hair against her head like a doll's wig, favored mostly greys and tans in her dress. Her mouth was no longer a straight line. Now it turned down at the corners. The father was still tall, reedy, and scowling.

But the boy was almost a man, about to graduate from high school and no longer trembling at his father's scoldings.

"Sure, I want to go," he said as he faced his father and mother in the parlor.

"To that school party with all those sons and daughters of Satan? I should say not." His father picked up a hymnbook from the table, beat on it with his fingertips.

George looked at his mother. "Mom?"

"No."

"Mom, please."

"You heard your father."

The tapping on the hymn book stopped. "Well, Lottie, how does it happen you're agreeing with me?"

"She always agrees with you against me," George flung himself down on the sofa.

"I'm just agreeing with GOD, the Father in Heaven.

Not with you, Jim, or with you, George."

"I know it would bust you all up to agree with me once." George laughed shortly.

"And with me." His father laid the hymnbook down, evened it's edge with the edge of the table as he talked. "And let me tell you this, Lottie Pratt. When you disagree with your husband on the question of that new lady preacher at the church, when you refuse to see my way on that - you are disagreeing with GOD Almighty."

"I'd be mortally afraid to talk that way." The father and mother glared across the room at each other with angry dignity. George stood up and started for the door.

"If this comes between us as man and wife, I will not change from what I know to be right."

"And I will not change from what I know to be right."

At the front door, George turned. "And I don't care if you both drop dead. All this shouting and screaming about church. About GOD. GOD of love - phooey! I've never seen any of it here. And I am going to that party."

After high school, George Pratt was on his own.

He found a job in Chicago and made his own friends. The good ones at high school, children of Satan? Then the fellows in the city that "got high," as they say, on Saturday night were no worse. Wrong to go to a party? No worse to drink. GOD? George heard the word only in the corner bar and grill. Mother and father? He wanted to run, to slam somebody, to hide, when he remembered.

Until the news came that his father was ill. When he got home, his mother met him. "Yes, he's

ill," she said, cracking her knuckles rhythmically. "But George, your father and I -. Well, when your father comes to his senses and apologizes to me, I'll forgive him about the trouble over our lady preacher."

George stared down at the lettering on the hymnbook on the table. It seemed to leap and dance. "But Mom, he's going to die. The doctor says so. You don't mean to stand there and tell me that church split-up five years ago has turned you against Dad for good?"

"He knows the Word of GOD. He knows what he has to do. I'll be perfectly willing to forgive him after he admits to me that I've been right all these years and he's been wrong," his mother said.

More months went by. When word came that his father was dying, George Pratt fell into a cold shower to sober up, took the first train home. His mother stood in the hallway, unsmiling, watching George as he climbed the stairs to his father's room.

In the bedroom, on the floor by the bed, was a mound of blankets. George heard a groan. "Dad, Dad," he said. "What are you doing, lying on that floor?"

His father's voice was a jumble of moans and words.

"Fell out of bed . . . early this morning. I can't get back." His mother stood in the doorway, her eyes angry and defiant. "Your mother, she won't help."

George bent down, lifted his father back into bed. "Leave him alone . . . until he admits he's disobeyed GOD all these years, let him get back into bed the way he got out. Under his stubborn will."

Thus George Pratt's father died. And as George saw it, it was with GOD standing between him and his mother.

After the funeral, George got drunk.

But he wasn't drunk when he met Golden Malone.

Irish and beautiful with hair as black as a raven's wing, George would say, repeating some poetry he'd read somewhere and remembered. Golden Malone.

George and Golden talked a lot about their future. In short, eager sentences.

"You'll be the most wonderful cab driver in all of Chicago."

"I mean, we will live in Chicago." "Just the two of us."

"I love you."

"I love you."

Golden came to visit where George's Mom lived. "Let that creature in the house? I should say not. For all her good looks, she doesn't eat the right things. She doesn't go to our church," his mother said.

Golden heard. George knew she would. But in all their short, eager talks, Golden, never critical, never mentioned his mother.

She just packed her suitcase and left. Left one night when she and George had a seven o'clock date. She never explained why. But George knew it was because of his mother. And she was too fine a girl, he reasoned, to force him to make a choice between them.

For six months, he wrote to Golden every day. "Marry me."

"I'll go to Chicago."

"I love you."

Finally, "I'm coming to Indiana to get you."

The night he planned to leave, the telegram from the Indiana neighbors came. "Golden Malone died. Suicide. Come if possible."

George Pratt never got to Golden Malone's funeral.

He went to Chicago and stayed there. He found a job driving a cab, and made a friend of a fellow named Bill. For six years, every day was like the one before. The days ahead all looked as if they were marching in the same dreary column. But George didn't care any more. He had Bill and their pals and a bottle whenever he wanted it.

George Pratt didn't fret about GOD any more. Except once in a while.

"I like you, Bill," he'd tell his pal. "You feel the way I do about GOD."

"Like I say, George, if there is a GOD, like they yak about in church, why is there so much suffering in the world. No self-respecting GOD would let little innocent children suffer," Bill said.

"Or let a guy find a girl like Golden and then let her take her own life."

"That's what I mean. He's a great GOD, a great GOD. Here, hold out your glass, George. It's half-empty."

In December, 1931, George Pratt drank through more days than he drove his cab. One morning, he woke up and counted his change. Hangover or not, he had to work. He started toward the Loop in his cab. When he checked his meter, he found it was jammed. He circled back to a garage. The mechanic had a rush job ahead of it; two hours later, he fixed the meter for George. With the meter clicking, George hit the traffic again. The cab tilted, then bumped. A flat, no spare! Back in the same garage again; the same mechanic; he'd have to wait another two hours

for service.

George slammed the cab door. "Fix it when you get around to it. I'm quitting for the day."

He walked downtown, secured a couple of dollars from another driver parked in front of the Palmer House, got warmed up in the nearest bar.

He was drunk enough to be mean when he shuffled down State Street. He turned his coat collar up.

"Hi, fella," someone said from a doorway.

"Huh?" George saw a clean-looking man. A sign over the door read, "Pacific Garden Mission."

"Come in and get warm," the man called.

"Who's cold? Leave me alone," George said. Then he stopped. "O.K., I will come in. And when I come back out, I'll tell you just how they're wrong there with that GOD business. I know."

George sat through the meeting. The Pacific Garden Mission GOD didn't sound much like the GOD he'd heard so much about, the GOD that shook His fist in your face and shoved you around.

After the meeting, the man who had called out to him from the doorway was beside him.

"I don't believe in this love of GOD business," George said. "But I got to admit this GOD of love the preacher claimed he knew, and the GOD of a mother who blew sky high when I was a boy and chewed gum doesn't sound like the same GOD."

The man shook his head. "I don't know about your parents' religion, but some folks twist the Bible by their own stubborn disposition."

"But if He's such an all-loving GOD, why did the girl I love commit suicide?"

The man put his hand on George's shoulder. "Human suffering isn't GOD's idea. Sin and suffering have separated man from GOD, but JESUS CHRIST came and on the cross stretched His own body over that space between man and GOD and bridged the gap. And because CHRIST died you, George, can walk through faith in Him right back into the arms of GOD.

"Your way of living isn't working now, is it?" he asked George.

"It sure isn't."

"Our way never does. Only His way works, JESUS CHRIST's way."

"O.K. I'll take a chance on what you said," George told him. "If it isn't true, well, what'll I lose? Uh, what'll I say to Him?"

George Pratt, maintenance man at the Northwest Armory, tells it that way. He runs his finger through his greying hair and grins. "Maybe we got chewing gum at our house today, but no bottles. Bibles and lots of letters from fellows I led to CHRIST after I entered the navy at forty-one years. [Some of them yielding to GOD later, when in base hospitals in New Caledonia and Auckland, New Zealand, because wounded Seaman First Class George Pratt came by their beds walking with JESUS.]

"By the way, I'd like you to meet my wife, Leona."

~ end of chapter 16 ~
